

VZCZCXYZ0010
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAS #1082/01 3411250
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 071250Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8199
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001082

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2019
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PBTS](#) [MARR](#) [PTER](#) [AG](#) [MO](#) [UN](#)
SUBJECT: NGOS IN TINDOUF ON HUMANITARIAN AND POLITICAL
ISSUES OF WESTERN SAHARAN REFUGEES

Classified By: CDA a.i. William Jordan; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11](#). (C) Summary: DCM on November 21 met with several UN officials working with the Sahrawi refugees near Tindouf, Algeria, to discuss the status of assistance and development programs. The groups included the UN peacekeeping force MINURSO, the World Food Program, and the UN High Commission for Refugees. These contacts believe that monitoring of food distribution has improved and reduced corruption to a minimum and that the Polisario Front leadership is largely responsive to the demands of the refugees. Education in the camps is broadly adequate but most children above the age of 10 leave the camps to complete their education abroad. Unemployment is chronic. Virtually no camp residents wish to return to Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara at this time. With most men absent, women enjoy a high social status. End summary.

MINURSO Discusses Ceasefire

[12](#). (C) Carmen Johns, head of MINURSO's Liaison Office in Tindouf, commented that Moroccan accusations of violations of the ceasefire are exaggerated and that, despite some military buildups and restrictions on MINURSO movements, no shots had been fired by either side within the buffer zone since the ceasefire was concluded in 1991. Terms of the ceasefire prohibit all military activity within five km of the buffer strip and all military exercises within 30 km of the buffer strip. Past Moroccan allegations of ceasefire violations in Tifariti are unfounded, she explained, as Tifariti is located approximately 70 km from the buffer strip. She noted that the seven Sahrawi human rights activists who visited the refugee camps in early October were honored by a military parade, as are all prominent guests, but that they did not cross into the "liberated" area of Western Sahara east of the berm.

WFP Sees Improvements in Quality Control

[13](#). (SBU) Bassam Hana, head of the WFP Tindouf sub-office, discussed the contributors and types of food assistance to the refugees. He said that the Sahrawi receive food aid mainly in the form of cereals, including wheat, flour, rice, barley, and toasted corn. The Sahrawis occasionally receive supplementary contributions, particularly during Ramadan, such as lentils, sugar, oil, tea, yeast, and fruit. While the Sahrawis do not wish to give the impression that they want to become permanent refugees, Hana said that they wholeheartedly accept long-term assistance like food warehouses and hospitals.

[14](#). (SBU) Hana stressed that during his year and a half in Tindouf he has seen significant improvements concerning the transparency and efficiency of the WFP's dealings with the Sahrawi refugees. The WFP has gained the trust of the Sahrawi refugees, and in turn, has increased its presence and access to information. In response to the DCM's inquiry about past allegations of corruption with respect to food

distribution (specifically, allegations that the Sahrawi Red Crescent, as Polisario's distribution agent, had sole control of food warehouses and drew out stocks according to its higher estimates of beneficiaries than those accepted by donor governments), Hana said that it is no longer a problem and that the Sahrawi have cooperated with the WFP to improve the monitoring, record keeping, and quality control of food aid. (Note: We did hear elsewhere that the issue of selling food rations remains an ongoing issue inasmuch as some families sell food rations to defray school fees for children seeking private education. End note.) Lastly, Hana said that the combination of cash and in kind donations from the U.S. have allowed the WFP to quickly and easily address unanticipated delays in the delivery of food to Tindouf, which can damage the refugees' confidence and trust in the WFP.

Challenges Persist in Monitoring Food Aid

15. (SBU) DCM met with the head of UNHCR's sub-office in Tindouf Mohammad Arif and Associate Field Officer Mario Echeverria to discuss humanitarian assistance and social issues faced by the Sahrawi refugees. Arif explained that UNHCR receives approximately USD30 million in assistance from seven main partners including food, transportation, and schools. He cited the European Commission's humanitarian aid organization (ECHO) as one of its largest donors. However, Arif noted that Sahrawi groups work directly with and receive about the same amount of aid from numerous private donors in Spain, which presents a challenge to UNHCR's monitoring efforts.

Refugees Regret Lack of Opportunities

16. (SBU) UNHCR officials spoke of the high value the Sahrawi place on education and of their efforts to increase educational opportunities in the camps, especially by the creation of secondary schools. To fulfill those goals and prevent the separation of families, the Sahrawi often must utilize much of the space and resources of the existing middle school in each camp to establish a secondary school, which exacerbates the problems of the underdeveloped education system. Since the 1990s, the refugees have sent their children, usually at the age of 10, to Algeria, Spain, Cuba, or Libya for schooling. Students do not return until after completing university. Some families barter their food or other goods in order to cover the costs associated with outside education. Our interlocutors explained that Sahrawi youth, some of whom have received degrees in engineering or physics, find it difficult to readapt after their return and are particularly frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities in the camps. There are some jobs associated with small businesses such as restaurants, internet cafes, or repair shops, or labor intensive jobs like brick making. Young men are required to spend a few months at a time in military service in the "liberated" zone.

17. (C) When asked whether some Sahrawi refugees request repatriation to Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, the UN officers gave an emphatic "no," saying that the refugees reject living under Moroccan control. They noted that the Sahrawis residing in the Moroccan-controlled areas who wish to visit family in the refugee camps fear reprisals from the Moroccan government. They said that in the past year, they heard that one Sahrawi man living west of the berm had made plans to visit the camps until Moroccan police picked up his sister, beat her, and then asked him if he still wished to travel to Tindouf. Echeverria later noted that the Sahrawis in the Moroccan-controlled areas see the refugees as "wimps" who do not have to put up with Morocco's political repression.

Polisario Leadership Beholden to Refugees' Demands

18. (C) Echeverria, who appeared objective about the situation in Tindouf and was cited by his superior as being

the most knowledgeable in the office on such issues, explained his views on the Polisario's leadership. He said that, although the Polisario seeks to promote a particular ideology, the group and its policies are very much beholden to the demands of the refugees, the vast majority of whom support a referendum that includes the option of independence. He argued that the Algerian government exercises more control over the opinions of the Algerian people than the Polisario leadership wields over the refugees. The field officer said some Polisario supporters, mainly youth, favor war against Morocco as an option, which they believe would draw increased international attention to their cause. Importantly, Echeverria said that the Polisario had acknowledged that it would need to "give a little" at the informal talks in Vienna last August, but that the option of independence would have to be taken account of in some way. Echeverria criticized the Polisario leaders' hold on power, saying that most of them have held key positions for years, which runs counter to the more democratic tendencies he sees at the grassroots level.

Sahrawi Women Occupy Important Social Status

¶9. (SBU) Echeverria offered several examples to support his statement that Sahrawi women play important social and political roles within the camps, in part because some men may be away for military service or are studying or working elsewhere in Algeria or abroad. Some of the Polisario's political deputies are women. It is primarily women who have been elected at the local level to receive food assistance from the Sahrawi Red Crescent and redistribute it throughout the camps. Echeverria said that although some refugee children have clearly been prompted in their statements to UN officials, he asserted that one group of children he spoke with in the Dakhla camp reacted with confusion and shock when he asked whether they had ever witnessed domestic violence in the camp. They appeared to be speaking genuinely when they told him that violence against women was wrong.

A Polisario-Directed Tour of the Refugee Camps

¶10. (SBU) During the portion of the trip under Polisario's supervision (partially reported reftel), DCM and Poloff spent several hours touring Smara, the largest of the four refugee camps, and visited an elementary school, a school for

handicapped children, a hospital, and the Polisario's military museum. The tour of the school included stops in classrooms of about thirty students each, with classes of various subjects being taught in Arabic and Spanish. The DCM visited several rooms in the hospital, which appeared to treat primarily women and children suffering from malnutrition and anemia and was currently undergoing renovations. In one room, a medic from a Spanish NGO was giving a class to women on how to recognize and treat malnutrition. The military museum included artwork, photography, and documentation honoring the "martyrs" of the war with Morocco. The external section of the museum displayed dozens of types of military equipment including aircraft, tanks, artillery, and landmines. The museum guide explained that much of the equipment had been recovered in the course of the war during the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

JORDAN